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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement* submitted by Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 January 2000]

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN IRAQ

"Are the children well?" This question, commonly used as a greeting among some peoples of the Pacific Islands, is a poignant reminder that the well-being of children should be the concern of all of us. With this in mind, Franciscans International and Dominicans for Justice and Peace, together with the Justice and Peace Promoters of the Dominican Order in the United States, along with other signatories, bring to the attention of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on Human Rights, the situation of children in Iraq. Our first grave concern is that the sanctions and embargo imposed on Iraq by the United Nations is adversely affecting the health and well-being of Iraqi children. Furthermore, these policies violate their rights as guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations of 1948 (Universal Declaration), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (Convention).

Specifically, this presentation would like to draw attention to the violation of the rights of Iraqi children:

- To develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity (art. 27 of the Convention; art. 3 of the Universal Declaration).

- To enjoy the guaranteed benefits of social security and the entitlement to grow and develop in health; to this end, special care and protection should be provided to both child and mother, including pre-natal and post-natal care. The child must have the right to adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and medical services (arts. 24, 27 and 31 of the Convention; arts. 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration).

- To receive education (art. 28 of the Convention; art. 26 of the Universal Declaration).

- To be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal human fellowship and in full consciousness that their energy and talents should be devoted to the service of humankind (art. 29 of the Convention).

"Are the children well?"

Prior to the events of 1990 and 1991 (Security Council resolution 661 (1990) on the trade and embargo restrictions against Iraq resulting from the Gulf War), Iraqi children enjoyed a fairly good standard of living. Reports from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) depicted Iraq as having achieved high levels of growth in most sectors of social and economic development, placing it in the highest percentile among developing nations in the 1980s. However, it is apparent from more recent documentation submitted by various agencies connected with the United Nations that the cumulative effects of war-related destruction and the restrictions imposed on Iraq's economy and trade have dramatically impaired the country's ability to provide for the well-being of its children in the 1990s.

."Are the children well?"

The United Nations report on the current humanitarian situation in Iraq, dated 30 March 1999, compares the State of Iraq before and after the events of 1990-1991. This report provides the basis for our concern as well as our hope that the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on Human Rights will intercede on behalf of Iraqi children and advocate the lifting of the embargo and sanctions against Iraq. It appears from the information in the above-mentioned report that the lifting of Security Council resolution 661 (1990) is essential if Iraq is to ensure a decent quality of life for its people, especially its children.

Economic and social indicators

Prior to the events of 1990-1991, Iraq's social and economic indicators were generally above average for the region's developing countries. With oil accounting for 60 per cent of the country's GDP and 95 per cent of its foreign currency earnings, Iraq's economy was heavily dependent on the external sector and sensitive to fluctuations in the price of oil. In 1991 Iraq's GDP plummeted by more than two thirds owing to the decline in crude oil production and the devastation of the industrial and service sectors of the economy. Although Iraq is now beginning to export more oil, revenue remains insufficient owing to a combination of low oil prices, delays in obtaining spare parts for the oil industry and a general obsolescence of the oil infrastructure. If and when sanctions are lifted, it will take a long time before the infrastructure is repaired and the economy recovers.

Food production and availability

In 1990, Iraq's domestic food production represented only one third of total consumption of most essential food items. The remaining two thirds was imported. Due to its relative prosperity, Iraq had the capacity to import this large quantity of food requirements at an estimated cost between $2.5 and $3 billion a year. Since the events of 1990-1991, Iraq has found it hard to provide for the nutritional needs of its people. This is partly related to problems in increasing domestic production as spare parts and chemicals are difficult to obtain or restricted under resolution 661 (1990). Spokespersons for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have stated that when the water supply system was damaged during the Gulf War bombing, Iraq's ability to irrigate was seriously diminished. The combination of high salt content in the soil, rapid evaporation due to high temperatures and a lack of materials needed for irrigation has rendered much of Iraq's soil barren. Also, the lack of external trade relations, which are necessary to import food, is another factor contributing to the food shortage. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the average cost of basic food in 1995 was 850 times more than in July 1990. This inflation contributes to exacerbate the problem.

"Are the children well?"

The prevalence of malnutrition in Iraqi children under 5 years of age almost doubled between 1991 and 1997. One in five children is malnourished, a rise of 73 per cent since 1991.

Almost the entire child population of Iraq has been affected by a shift in its nutritional status towards malnutrition. Since 1990, the rate of anaemia among Iraqi women has risen to 70 per cent. The number of low-birth weights (less than 2.5 kg) also rose as a predictable effect of maternal malnutrition. WFP reports that the monthly food baskets distributed in Iraq last only 20 days. As such, the food baskets are obviously an inadequate solution to the growing problem of malnutrition. Before 1991, with an extensive network of water treatment plants, World Health Organization (WHO) estimates indicated that 90 per cent of the Iraqi population had access to an abundant quantity of safe drinking water. WFP estimates that since 1991, access to safe drinking water has dropped to 50 per cent of the 1991 level. The availability of safe drinking water is even more precarious in rural areas of Iraq. A significant cause of illness and deaths among children under five years of age seems to be the massive deterioration, since 1990, of Iraq's drinking-water systems.

Health care

Prior to 1991, according to WHO, health care extended to 97 per cent of the urban population and 78 per cent of the rural population. The health care system was based on an extensive network of health facilities linked by reliable communication and a large fleet of service vehicles and ambulances. Since 1991 shortages of water and electricity, lack of transportation and the collapse of the telecommunications system have degraded the functional capacity of the health care system. Studies by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) point out that electricity shortages due to the continuing effect of war damage have resulted in power cuts lasting over six hours a day. The shortage of electricity has also adversely affected the water supply and health services.

"Are the children well?"

According to WHO, communicable diseases and malaria, which had been under control in Iraq, returned in epidemic proportions in 1993, rendering the health care situation in Iraq precarious. The impossibility of providing the drugs necessary for treatment is contributing to the spread of disease. Children are among the growing number of victims claimed by these problems. The child mortality rate has tripled since 1990.

Education

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that between the mid-1970s and 1990, the Government of Iraq made sizeable investments in the education sector. By 1989, the combined primary and secondary enrolment rate stood at 75 per cent. Illiteracy was reduced to 20 per cent.

"Are the children well?"

Since 1991, school enrolment for all ages has declined by 53 per cent. In central and southern Iraq, 83 per cent of school buildings have suffered serious damage and are in need of repair. UNICEF indicates that substantive programmes in reducing adult and female illiteracy have been cut back or have stopped altogether. The rising number of street children and children who work is related to the increasing school drop-out rate. More and more families are forced to rely on working children to supplement household income. Figures from UNESCO indicate that the number of dropouts from elementary schools has increased from 95,692 in 1990 to 131,658 in 1999.

The rights of Iraqi children that are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration and the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been seriously compromised in the 1990s. In a significant way the lasting effects of the Gulf War and United Nations measures such as Security Council resolutions 661 (1990) and 986 (1995) (Oil for Food), have had calamitous effects on Iraqi children. It is time to address this problem through intervention. The international community has made a commitment to ensure that every child "be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal human fellowship". How can we ensure this right for Iraqi children unless we address those policies and practices that are severely compromising their happiness and health? The question that we must face as we address this concern is before us: "Are the children well?" May our response direct our conscience and our actions on behalf of the children of Iraq.

Franciscans International and Dominicans for Justice and Peace, together with the Justice and Peace Promoters of the Dominican Order in the United States, along with other signatories, recommend that the Commission on Human Rights strongly urge the international community to lift the sanctions and embargo on Iraq and advocate immediate measures to halt and reverse the deteriorating quality of life of Iraqi children.

Signatory Organizations:

The Dominican Justice Promoters of the United States
Dominican Leadership Conference of the United States, Executive Committee
Dominican Sisters International, Coordinating Council, Rome, Italy
Confederation of Dominican Sisters of Latin America and the Caribbean
United Nations NGO Representative Dominican Leadership Conference, USA
Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, United Nations Representative
Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, Kenosha, WI, USA, Leadership Team
Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, NY, USA, Executive Team
Dominican Sisters, St. Mary's Congregation, New Orleans, LA, USA, General Council
Dominican Sisters of Hope, Ossining, NY, USA, Leadership Team
Dominican Sisters of Cabra, Region of Louisiana, USA
Dominican Sisters of the Presentation/USA Province
Dominican Sisters of Edmonds, Washington, Congregation of Holy Cross, USA

Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, KS, USA, Leadership
Dominican Sisters of San Raphael, San Raphael, California, USA, Leadership Team
Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de' Ricci, Elkins Park, Pa, USA, General Council
Dominican Sisters, Congregation of the Sacred Heart, Houston, Texas, USA
Dominican Sisters of St. Mary's of the Springs, OH, USA, Leadership Team
Dominican Sisters, Tacoma, WA, USA
Adrian Dominicans, Great Lakes Chapter, Detroit, MI, USA
Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic, New Orleans, LA, USA
Grand Rapids Dominicans, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, Leadership Team
Sisters of St. Dominic, Akron, OH, USA
Sisters of St. Dominic, Blauvelt, NY, USA, Leadership Team
Sisters of St. Dominic, Caldwell, NJ, USA, Leadership Team
Sisters of St. Dominic, Congregation of the Holy Cross, Amityville, NY, USA
Sisters of St. Dominic, Racine, WI, Leadership Team
Oxford Dominican Sisters, Oxford, ILL, USA
Sinsinawa Dominicans, Southern Province, USA, Leadership Team
Sinsinawa Dominicans Justice and Peace Office, River Forest, IL, USA
Springfield Dominican Leadership Team, Springfield ILL, USA
Dominican Province of Canada
Parable Conference, River Forest, ILL, USA
NETWORK, A Catholic Social Justice Lobby, Washington, DC, USA
Fellowship of Reconciliation, Nyack, New York, USA
8th Day Center for Justice, Chicago, ILL, USA
PAX CHRISTI, USA
Intercommunity Center for Justice and Peace, NY, USA, Executive Board
Brothers of the Sacred Heart, Elmhurst, NY, USA
Capuchin Franciscan Friars, Brooklyn, New York, USA
Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn, New York, USA
Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, New York, New York, USA
Franciscan Sister of Peace, Haverstraw, New York, USA
Franciscan Sister of Allegany, St. Bonaventure, New York, USA
Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement, Garrison, NY, USA
Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, Brooklyn, NY, USA
Carmelite Sisters of Charity, Washington, DC, USA
Congregation of Christian Brothers, New Rochelle, NY, USA
Congregation of the Infant Jesus, Rockville Center, NY, USA
Congregation of St. Joseph, Brentwood, New York, USA
Congregation De Notre Dame, Ridgefield, CT. USA
Daughters of Divine Charity, Staten Island, NY, USA
Daughters of Wisdom, Islip, New York, USA
Holy Cross Brothers, New Rochelle, NY, USA
Little Sisters of the Assumption, New York, New York, USA
Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, New York, New York, USA
Paulist Fathers, Scarsdale, New York, USA

Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers, Esopus, New York, USA
Religious of Jesus and Mary, Highland Mills, New York, USA
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, St. Louis, MO, USA
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Tarrytown, New York
Religious Sisters of Mercy, Hartsdale, New York, USA
School Sisters of Notre Dame, Wilton, Conn., USA
Sisters of Charity, New York, New York, USA
Sisters of Divine Compassion, White Plains, NY, USA
Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Jamaica, New York, USA
Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, Monroe, Ct., USA
Sisters of Mercy, Brooklyn, New York, USA
Sisters of St. Agnes, Fond du Lac, WI, USA
Sisters of the Presentation of BVM, Newburgh, New York, USA
Sisters of the Presentation, Staten Island, New York, USA
Sisters Servants of Immaculate Heart of Mary, Scranton, Pa, USA
Society of the Holy Child, Drexel Hill, PA, USA
Society of Jesus, New York, New York, USA
Society of St. Ursula, Rhinebeck, New York, USA
Ursulines of the Roman Union, Bronx, New York, USA

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